Best thesaurus for IBM PCs not an easy find

One of the hottest new features available for users of IBM PC or compatible computers is something called a "pop-up thesaurus." It provides alternative words with similar meanings in a "window" drawn right on your computer screen — without you having to leave your word-processing program or hunt for a book on the shelf.

A cousin of pop-up spelling programs that proofread documents as they are entered (like Turbo Lightning, previously reviewed), a thesaurus program can be invaluable for secretaries, managers who write their own reports, and students.

At the touch of a key, you can replace a word you've already written with another word suggested by the computer. The interruption to your writing is very short, so your train of thought typically is not lost. (In my case, when I go hunting for a reference book, I sometimes find upon returning that I forgot why I went!)

Developed and perfected only recently, thesaurus programs probably will be commonplace in the future. For the present, however, very few people know about them. Also, because some of the early versions were hard to use, many people (myself included) were initially convinced that they weren't worth the trouble.

If that's your case, too, you'll be surprised to discover the vast differences between the early versions and the "state of the art" programs now available.

The difference is size

The main problem with early versions of thesaurus programs (and with two of the three I tested) is simple — they contain too few words in their lists.

If you discover that almost every time you try to use it, the word being checked is not found, you'll become discouraged and angry instead of happy with your purchase. In that case, it's a waste of time. Most of us have had this experience at one time or another with book-based thesauri — and perhaps that's why they are not more widely used.

On the other hand, if every time you use it you're rewarded handsomely for your trouble, with many alternative words to choose from, it's easy to become addicted to its use.

For example:

✔ The newest version of **Word Perfect (4.1)**, the popular word-processing program, has a limited thesaurus built in. By touching the Alt and F1 keys simultaneously, the program will instantly provide you with alternative words. The only trouble is, most of the words I tried were not contained. When I tried the words "editorial" and "gimmick" — both contained in last week's column — neither were found. My overall hit rate was about 20 percent, which was much too low to be considered adequate.

✔ The on-line spell-checking program called **Turbo Lighting** also has an on-line thesaurus that can be used with practically any word-processing program. The program includes about 5,000 key words and about 50,000 synonyms, (the same number, by the way, as another competitive program called Reference Set) but my hit rate was still only about 20 percent. Neither "editorial" nor "gimmick" was found. In this case, I was not too disappointed in the purchase because the spell-checking feature of the program is so good that it fully justifies the purchase all by itself. Unlike other spell-checking programs that proofread an entire document at a time, this one can be set up to "beep" right after incorrectly spelled words are entered.

✔ Finally, I used the latest version of **Word Finder** (from Writing Consultants of East Rochester, N.Y.). Its performance was astounding. After typing the word "editorial" and asking for alternatives, all of the following words were instantly listed: article, bulletin, byline, column, communication, dispatch, item, newsletter and report. For "gimmick," it provided antic, device, diversion, doohickey, gambit, gizmo, maneuver, mischief, plot, ploy, prank, ruse, scheme, strategem, strategy, tactic, thingumajig, trick, widget and 15 others! What a difference. I was delighted and have been using the $79.95 program regularly ever since.

As it turns out, Word Finder has more than 15,000 key words and 220,000 synonyms — more than triple the number of key words and quadruple the number of synonyms of any of the others — and it works with almost all popular word-processing programs for the IBM PC and compatible computers.

ADVICE: Of all the thesaurus programs currently available, Word Finder is the best of the bunch. It's the only one that left me happy after each use, instead of frustrated, and I suspect you'll feel the same way. It is especially recommended for business environments where reports and letters are prepared regularly on personal computers. Although it's hard to estimate the dollar value of "increased productivity" from such a program, my guess is that its long term use will far outweigh its reasonable cost.

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